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Skillman-Burton Lead Central American Trade Mission

Today Lt. Governor Becky Skillman and Congressman Dan Burton announced they will head a delegation of Indiana agricultural and agribusiness leaders to Central America in early January. The goal for the six-day trade mission to Guatemala, Costa Rica and Panama is to create new business opportunities for Indiana's food and agricultural industry to generate economic growth for our state.

"Today's agriculture marketplace is a global one, and Hoosier producers and agribusinesses need to make the most of international sales and partnerships," said Lt. Governor Skillman who also serves as Secretary of Agriculture and Rural Development. "We have far more capacity than needed to meet the domestic food requirements of this country. To avoid excess capacity throughout the system, we must find new uses for our agricultural commodities and expand our sales to customers outside the United States."

"Indiana is home to the world's best-produced agricultural goods," said Congressman Burton. "By opening new and emerging markets and expanding existing markets throughout the globe, especially in Central America, we will continue Indiana's leadership role in agricultural exports and agribusiness, and ensure the future economic growth and prosperity of our fellow Hoosiers. This trade mission sends a strong message that Indiana's economic and political leaders are prepared to go anywhere in the world to create new economic opportunities for Indiana. We value our partnership and friendship with Central America and look forward to promoting business growth through this new initiative."

The Central American Trade Mission delegation is comprised of approximately 30 government, commodity organization, academic, and food and agribusiness leaders. The group will travel to the Central American region January 8-13, spending one or two days in each country. The focus of the delegation is to connect its members with specific business counterparts in each country, such as retailers, wholesalers, restaurant chains and other importers. Individual business meetings are therefore being arranged for delegation members. The delegation also will receive briefings by U.S. embassy staff in each country and a number of government and policy meetings will be held.

Two of the three countries on the Skillman-Burton Central American Trade Mission – Guatemala and Costa Rica – are a part of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). This agreement was recently ratified by the U.S. Congress, and the Indiana delegation's visit to the region will be the first of its kind since that occurred. The delegation also will travel to Panama, a country that is currently negotiating a separate free trade agreement with the United States.

Steadily expanding foreign demand has helped U.S. exports increase over time from \$7.3 billion in 1970 to \$62.4 billion in fiscal year 2005. U.S. food and agricultural exports to these three countries most recently totaled approximately \$850 million. Indiana exports \$1.8 billion in commodities and products each year – and we could sell more.

“Increasing our focus on international trade is a key strategy for the Indiana State Department of Agriculture,” said Indiana Agriculture director Andy Miller. He and Deputy Director Beth Bechdol will help lead the mission. “Indiana’s greatest agricultural strengths are in the hardwood, pork, soybean and corn sectors, and these are of great interest in Central America. We also see opportunities for many diversified and value-added products. Our delegation will focus on these key areas.”

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